



The Palmer Method

By Michael Corbin

"GEE!" Joe Palmer said. "Pick yourself a handful uh stars, pal."

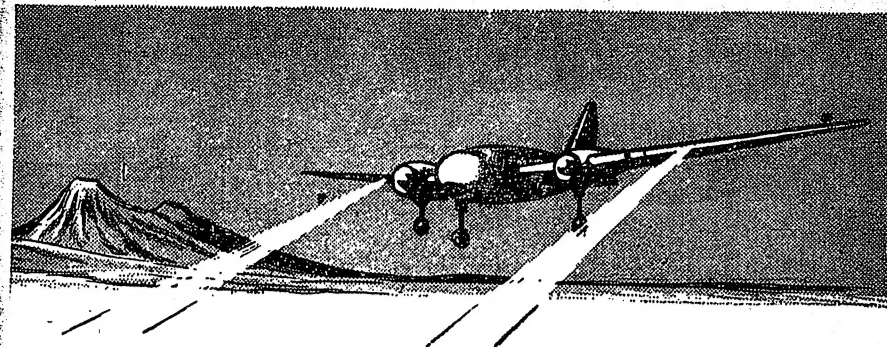
"They do seem impressively close and large," the man beside him agreed.

Joe pushed back his derby, stuck his hands into the pockets of his tight blue double-breasted overcoat, and surveyed the moonlit Arizona desert landscape. Pungent sage needled his

nostrils, the continual whisper of sand, shifted by errant winds, vibrated his eardrums, and giant cacti, like rheumatic old men, pushed twisted arms at the full moon.

Joe shivered. "This place'd drive me nuts. If that plane don't come—"

"Oh, I say. Surely there is no possibility it won't. That taciturn person who set us down here said within



the hour."

Joe looked at the luminous dial on his wrist. "Well, he'd better get here quick. The hour's almost up. I guess they gotta pick their time when they can slip over the border. So maybe we hadn't oughta get in a sweat. You on the lam, too?"

"On the—oh, I see. Fleeing authority, you mean?" The man chuckled softly, and turned his young hard face toward Joe.

"Not—exactly," he said.

Joe grunted, scanned the sky to the south again. He stiffened, followed a tiny drifting light with his eyes for a few seconds, pointed. "Look."

For a long moment they watched the pale golden dot thread a path among the golden dots. It might have been what is popularly misnamed a "shooting" star, except that it seemed not to be falling and it left

no trail, however faint, of radiance. Port and starboard wing lights suddenly flashed red and green, and the two men sucked in quick breaths.

"That's him," Joe Palmer said. He pulled a flashlight from his coat pocket and blinked it three times at the drifting light.

The colored wing-tip lights winked off and on three times.

They watched the plane circle over the quiet desert, then slide down a precalculated ramp of air. When the wheels touched hard sand, the two men ran for it.

The small, dark pilot stepped out and flashed a light in their faces. He nodded. "You," he said to Joe, "are Senor George Padway, and you,"—to the other—"Senor Joseph Palmer."

"You got us—" Joe began, but the pilot broke in.

"Quickly! Inside!"

Based on a radio script originally written for the CBS radio program *Suspense*.

By Ernest Martin & R. L. Richards

They clambered in. The pilot locked the door, and roaring motors lifted them into the jeweled sky.

"He got us mixed up," Joe said.

"It really isn't important," Padway replied, settling into his seat for the four-hour run to Mexico City.

Joe pushed his derby back on his head. "It could be," he objected. "Suppose this crate drops a wing or something, and one of us is killed. Then the pilot tells whoever is waitin' for us that I'm you and you're me. That could run either one of us into a jam."

"Hmm," Padway mused. "A possibility, but remote, don't you think, old boy?"

Joe took a pad of paper from one pocket, an expensive fountain pen from the other, and began making patterned circles and vertical lines. "You English?" he asked, presently.

"Yes. And you, unless my ear for accents is dulled, are from Brooklyn?"

"P. S. Eighty-three, Lennox Avenue."

Padway turned steady blue eyes towards Joe's hands. "I say, that's a handsome pen."

Joe's square face formed a pleased smile.

"Ain't another one like it in the world. Carries three colors of ink, red, blue and green, and I got a set of extra points runnin' from spider-web-fine to broad."

He didn't offer to show the pen to Padway.

Padway continued to stare at Joe's hand guiding the pen in graceful pat-

terns.

"What in heaven's name are you doing there?"

"Oh, just practicin'."

"Practicing what?"

"Penmanship. The Palmer Method."

"The—I see. I mean, I don't see."

"It's the way they learn you to write when you're a kid. Some guy named Palmer invented it. You make these ovals and lines, and pretty soon you get used to using your whole arm. Makes your writin' very pretty."

"But aren't you a bit old for that sort of thing, old boy?"

Joe chuckled. "All in the way you look at it. With me it's a business."

Padway puzzled over this for a moment. A light dawned on his long, thin face.

"Oh, of course. You're an instructor in penmanship."

Joe tipped his head back and began to laugh. His derby fell off and he grabbed it, still laughing.

"Yeah," he said, "that's it. An instructor in penmanship." He set his hat back on his head and grinned at Padway's puzzled countenance.

"You Americans baffle me," Padway said. "I wasn't aware I'd said anything hilarious."

Joe went back to his ovals and lines. "Well, it's like this. When I was a kid in school, the only subject I can pass is penmanship. I am strictly a whiz at it and my name being Palmer and all, it kind of makes a standing joke. You know. The kids say, 'Joe Palmer—he flunks in everything but writing . . . that's the Palmer Method.'"

Padway made a sound of polite amusement.

"So that's the way it started, see?"

Joe went on. "But I like to keep in practice because like I say—by now with me it's a business."

Puzzlement came again to Padway's face. He drew his arched brows together and frowned through the window at the night. Far below was the faint luminous desert under the full moon, but nowhere in that dusty waste was a light showing. He turned back to Joe presently.

"I still don't see how it could be a business."

Joe looked up with frosty eyes.

"Say, you ask a lotta questions, don't you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, old boy. No offense, really."

"Aw, that's okay. I don't mind. But what's in it for me?" Padway looked bewildered at this, and Joe continued: "I mean, how about me askin' you a coupla things?"

Padway smiled. It was a young and charming smile, out of place on a face that had become prematurely set in lines of wariness.

"By all means. Anything."

"Well," Joe said, continuing his pen exercises, "looks like we're in this together, whatever it is. We wouldn't be on this plane if we wasn't. So where do you fit in?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Palmer, but I hardly think I'm free to answer that question."

Joe grunted. "Okay," he said shortly. "Skip the whole thing."

The plane roared on through the

night. The stars seemed very close now. Joe changed points in his pen, and the lines grew broader. He practiced ovals, then slanting series of V's, then wavy lines like a radiograph.

Padway broke in on his concentration presently. "As you point out, though, Mr. Palmer, we are indubitably in this together. I see no harm in telling you my mission. As a matter of fact, I'm not really English."

"Huh? Where'd you glomm that accent?"

"In England. I was educated there. But the stuffy English attitude was not to my taste, and I took out citizenship in another country, during a revolution when I was an instructor in the technique of explosives."

"A soup man, huh?"

"I beg your pardon? A—oh, I think I remember. By soup you mean nitroglycerin?"

"You ain't just a-mutterin'."

"Why, ah, yes. I'm an expert both in its preparation and use."

"That ain't for me," Joe said. "Me, I'll take a shillelagh or a shiv. No noise."

"One can hardly knock a bridge down with a club, old boy."

"No, but you can bash in a head even with a good heavy shoe. So you're goin' down here to shoot a bridge, huh? Bet you get a fancy price."

"Oh, yes," Padway said complacently. "Outlaws pay well."

"Well, don't know what the hell I'm goin' for. I had to get outa the

country, though, and this showed up through some connections I got."

"Perhaps," Padway hazarded, "it's in connection with your, ah, business. Though how it is a business is still beyond my comprehension."

Joe put his pen away and leaned back. He looked directly at Padway, and examined the expensive tweeds, the general air of well-being. "You sure must get paid plenty for whatever you do."

Padway smiled coldly.

"Well, about this here business. I write checks."

Padway frowned again, then suddenly broke out an apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry, old man, but you and I simply don't seem to speak the same language. Do you mean you are employed to make out payroll checks, or some such?"

Joe narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "You kiddin', Mac? I write checks and sign other people's names to 'em."

"Oh, I—think I see. Forgery, eh?"

"With knobs on, pal."

"I don't quite see, then, just what use they intend to put you to. Where would you fit into a revolution?"

The word came out of the blue and hit Joe Palmer in the vocal chords. He opened his mouth, tried to repeat it, flapped like a trout trying desperately to get back to water.

"I say, old boy," Padway said with concern. "You don't look well. Air-sick?"

Joe wagged his head. His derby fell off. He made a half-hearted

effort to pick it up, stopped and goggled at Padway.

He finally managed it: "Revolution?"

"Didn't you know?" Padway asked in surprise.

Joe's voice came back, and presently he grinned sheepishly. "No, but I guess it don't matter, huh? A buncha Spiks gallopin' around shootin' off their roscoes, nobody gets hurt and everybody goes home."

Padway shook his head. "I'm afraid you labor under a misapprehension. Politics is a serious business in Mexico today. I, for example, am engaged to blow up a bridge as the train bearing *El Presidente* crosses it on The Day. Perhaps I shouldn't have told you this, but I suppose it doesn't matter. You're in this as deeply as I."

"Deeper," Joe said gloomily. "They got me outa the U.S. and I agreed to take any job they offered me, figgerin' I'd find an angle."

He glanced out the window. Far below an occasional gleam of yellow light located a dwelling. "Too late to go back, and I can't jump outa this crate." He turned to Padway. "Whadda you suppose they'll make me do, carry a rifle?"

Padway shrugged his beautiful tweed shoulders. "Seems likely. But say!" His eyes lighted. "You seem like a good chap, and I think we could work well together. I'll put in a word for you as my assistant. What do you say to that?"

"Uh-uh." Joe made a decided negative. "I don't like things that

go bang."

"But the operation is simple, really. There is no possible danger."

"I still don't like 'em. But, like you say, if there's no danger, it'd be better'n luggin' a rifle. What'll it pay?"

Padway considered a moment. "I dare say we should be able to arrive at a suitable remuneration. Not as much as my—well, as you Americans say—well into five figures."

Joe's eyes widened. "For blown' up a lousy bridge? Twenty G's?"

"It's a highly paid profession, my friend."

As the plane snored on through the night, Joe Palmer went back to his practice. He filled sheet after sheet with the symbols of Palmer, and thought about his companion.

"Well into five figures," the guy had said. That meant at least ten grand, maybe fifty. A lot of geetus just for wrecking a bridge. Maybe, though, when you came right down to it, it wasn't too much. That stuff made an awful noise, and if you got in the way, you could wind up shy a leg or so.

Take it on the whole, Joe preferred his own method. Fifty G's didn't come often in one hunk, but you could make it by the right kind of technique.

Still, fifty grand in one hunk—

The plane lurched, spoiling a perfect oval Joe was making, turning it into a kid's scrawl. Joe lifted pen from paper, trying to protect the point, and the plane lurched again.

He felt the blood drain from his face, and looked at Padway.

Padway was gripping the arms of his seat and staring out the window, like he was calculating the distance to the ground.

"What makes?" Joe asked, and his question was very loud, because just at that moment the motors cut out.

"I don't know," Padway said, and started to get to his feet.

The dark little pilot stuck his head through the door and jabbered something in Spanish.

"I don't understand," Joe snapped. "English!"

"We will crash," the pilot said. "Fasten your safety belts."

"Where's a parachute?" Padway barked.

The pilot spread brown hands upward. "There is none. Excuse me while I try to save us."

Joe and Padway fastened their belts and the plane slid silently earthward. "D'ya think—?" Joe said.

"Remains to be seen," Padway said calmly.

"I don't wanta die!" Joe quavered. "Not in *this* chicken coop! I wanta get outa here!"

"Take it easy, old boy," Padway cautioned. "We are going to live through this or we're not. Just sit tight."

"Take it easy, hell!" Joe unfastened his safety belt, got into the aisle and started for the door.

Padway jumped after him, grabbed him by the arm. They had to brace themselves against the steep glide

angle.

"Steady on, Palmer. That's suicide."

Joe flung off Padway's hands. "I'm getting' outa here," he jabbered.

Padway grabbed him again as the lights went out. They struggled in the darkness on the slanting floor until Padway had Joe helpless in a steel grip.

"I'll not see you kill yourself," Padway snarled. "Get back in that seat, you fool."

He forced Joe into a seat, and had just fastened the safety belt when the plane hit.

The crash flung Padway against the pilot's door, but the safety belt held Joe in his seat. The plane bounced once, then crashed again with a jar that almost broke it apart.

Joe was unconscious for a time.

When he came to, he fumbled around in his mind for an explanation of the silence, the ache in his stomach muscles, the sore shoulder that lay against the side of the plane. He remembered gradually, and took the flashlight from his overcoat pocket.

The plane lay at such an awkward angle that he had to climb forward to where Padway had been flung.

One of Padway's arms hung at an impossible angle and his head was bloody. He was certainly in no condition to blow up any bridges. But he was not dead. His pulse-beat was faint but steady.

Joe went into the pilot's compartment.

The little dark man who had con-

fused their identities was dead. For all practical purposes, he had no head.

Joe turned away, swallowing his nausea, and returned to Padway. He looked at the broken, slim man with the young hard face and hated him. Padway had seen him go to pieces, break into the hysterical cries of ordinary cowardice. If Padway lived, Joe would always remember that, and hate him more and more.

There was that fifty grand—

With fifty G's, a man could get out of the country. If Joe Palmer were left dead here on the desert, certain annoying legal problems would be settled . . .

He went through Padway's pockets, and found a passport and some papers. Among these was a letter from one E. Villancos, with a Mexico City address, making a date to meet Padway in the International Club in Mexico City at a date to be fixed by Padway after arrival. Padway's signature was on several other papers, and Joe saw the lay-out clearly.

The routine would probably be a meeting with E. Villancos, the pay-off in advance, the settling of details as to time, and then a man would be on his own. He could catch a plane for El Paso, with fifty G's in his pocket, and scam.

Besides, Padway never would amount to anything even if he lived. With that skull, the poor guy might even turn out to be a half-wit. It wouldn't be doing him any favor to let him live . . .

Joe flashed the light around, tore

off a broken section of seat, and raised it to strike. He held the blow, took out all of his own identification, and transferred it to Padway's pockets.

Then he struck again and again, until George Padway—Joe Palmer now—was dead.

Joe forced the door open, and climbed down to the desert. The night was chill, and he was glad he had the heavy coat. He wished he'd brought his hat, but he wouldn't go back in that plane, now, for any amount of dough. He looked at the death trap and shuddered.

Suddenly, he broke into a run. Anywhere, any direction, to get away . . .

He ran until the clinging sand, which drowned his ankles at every plunging step, reduced him to a slow, awkward jumping. Then he stood still, panting, and his panting was loud in the silence. Sweat stood out on his face, and he dashed cold drops from his forehead with a shaking hand.

He wanted to look back, but dared not. What if Padway should come out of the plane, with his broken head, and stumble across the sand with wide, questioning eyes? What if that little pilot, who never got their names straight, should come out, with no head, and wander in aimless circles?

Joe Palmer began to tremble. Presently he was able to force a sickly smile and stop his trembling. Everything was okay. Dead men didn't get up and walk, especially

dead men with broken heads or no heads. He was George Padway now, with a job to do, a fifty-grand job.

All he had to do now was find the guy with the moola. That guy was in Mexico City. Okay, the thing to do was to get to Mexico City.

He looked around, trying to orient himself. Was it that way? Or that? You could tell by the stars, he'd heard.

Most of the stars Joe Palmer had seen in his life were in signs like Mr. Wrigley's, and he couldn't tell one from the other. There *was* a North Star, but where was it? How the hell could you find a star if you didn't know the directions? The moon was almost straight up; you couldn't tell from that.

Well, then, there ought to be a landmark . . .

But the desert by moonlight was an endless repetition of formless forms. That bush over there could be a coyote, or one of Singer's midgets. That sand dune could be a house with no lights.

And everything was the same color, the color of terror.

Joe felt it well up in him, a second tidal wave of fear carrying everything before it. He stood still, in a vacuum of dread, and his sweat formed new rivulets of panic on his whitened face.

Men died on the desert. Men went mad when they were alone too long.

He started running again, and when he stopped he never knew.

When he opened his eyes, people were there, people who moved and

talked. They talked in a language that didn't mean anything to him, but they talked. They were small and dark, with flashing teeth, and Joe thought they were wonderful because they gave him water.

The sun was high, and the day was hot, but Joe thought it was Paradise.

They made him understand, one way and another, that one of their number had heard the crash, and they had seen the high tail of the plane after the sun had come up. They had dispatched a messenger for the captain of the *rurales*.

They helped him to their village, skirting around a small lake on the edge of the desert, and gave him beans.

They gave him a little wine, too, and squatted in a dark-eyed circle to watch him eat. By the time the captain arrived, Joe was himself again. Phantoms and terrors of the night had been put uneasily to bed in his memory, and his grin was outwardly easy.

"Pretty lucky," he said to the captain.

Captain Orizaba agreed. "More lucky as the two others, Meester Padway."

"Poor guys," Joe said. "That Palmer was a right gee." He put on a face.

"Our sorrow is for the dead," the captain said sadly, "but for the living our service. You are going—?"

"Mexico City. Could I get a ride or something?"

"Is easy."

And it was. Of course, it took

nearly all of Joe's money, but what the hell? Wasn't he going to get fifty G's?"

AFTER he was in his hotel room, he began to practice. He wrote the name of George Padway over and over until he, the perfectionist, was satisfied. Then he wrote a note to E. Villancos.

"Dear Villancos:

I will look forward to meeting you tomorrow night at the place you mentioned.

George Padway."

Joe spent the day wandering about the city, so full of gay color, strange smells, and high prices. He didn't buy anything but an orchid for his buttonhole. He walked and walked, looking at shops, keeping his mind away from the incident in the plane.

When he went to bed, he couldn't keep it out of his mind. What if he got caught? That piece of broken seat would have blood on it, but that could be explained: Padway had broken it off when the crash had hurled him forward. Still—

Well, hell, it was like he told himself. The guy wouldn't ever be any good again. It was really a favor to bump him—well, to help him, really, out of a life he'd hate. Besides, he'd probably have died anyway.

If he could only get that picture out of his head. . . . Thank God for one thing, nobody could tell how he'd blown his top, both in the plane and on the desert. But it was so

damned lonesome out there. A guy couldn't be blamed for being a little jittery.

Joe got up, dressed, went out and bought a bottle of rum. He came back, drank until he couldn't lift the bottle, and fell across his bed in his clothes.

Two sober-faced gentlemen in khaki uniforms were applying cold cloths to his forehead the next morning when he swam out of spinning worlds into a vast head, his own.

"Senor Padway," the smaller and lighter of the two was saying, "please wake up."

Joe pushed their hands away and sat up. Air-hammers pounded in his head. He tried shaking it, and gave up, with a grimace of pain.

"Could I have some coffee?" he asked.

"To be sure," said the heavy, dark policeman. "We have made it. Black?"

"Whadda you think?"

They brought him black coffee. The first cup helped a little. The second cup made a human being of him, and the third cup made him into Joe Palmer again.

"What's it all about?" he asked.

"We wish to ask you a few questions about the crash," the small man, who seemed to be the senior officer, said.

"Sure," Joe said. "Shoot."

"Eshoot?" The small man worried at this. "Ah, yes. You mean 'begin', eh?"

"Yeah, shoot."

"Very well, then. Will you tell us

what happened?"

Joe described being in the plane, not the beginning of the flight on the Arizona desert, nor his reason for being there. He told of riding through the Mexican night—

"—with this guy Palmer. Seemed like a good joe. Then this Spik—this pilot said we was gonna crash."

Joe thought about this for a moment, then made an embarrassed smile. "I guess it was my fault Palmer got it. I lost my head a little, and tried to get out. He shoved me back in my seat and fastened my belt. Just before he could make it, we hit. I don't know anything after that. I came to out there, with all those people trying to help me, and that was it."

The small man nodded. "A very great shock, no doubt."

"That's why I got drunk," Joe said.

"Ah, yes. I understand. Very well, Senor Padway. We just wanted to hear from you the truth. We are esorry we bother."

"Nothing," Joe said, waving the thought away. "Have some grog?"

"So esorry," said the small man. "We are on duty. Adios."

"So long, pal."

When they were gone, he mentally shook hands with himself. He showered and shaved, and had a shot of rum to clear away the cobwebs. After he had breakfast, he went out into the city, and spent the day much as he had yesterday, looking at windows, driving his thoughts away.

Came time for the meeting with

Villancos, and he engaged a table in the International Club. A Negro orchestra was playing the songs of last month in that peculiar rhythm which only they can manage. Men and women in various combinations of evening white moved to their tables. The place had an air of subdued gaiety which Joe in his blue serge couldn't feel.

He took out his pad and his pen, and began practicing. Ovals and lines, lines and ovals. He ordered a drink, and devoted himself to the Palmer method. Once, with that full-arm motion, he drew the figures \$50,000. He smiled at that, and sipped his drink.

Then the softest voice he'd ever heard said: "Hello."

Joe, who was sensitive to music, classified her voice in the French horn range. It was deep and mellow, with a haunting quality that spoke of things desired and never found. He looked up.

She was slim and dark, with bright teeth, black eyes, and a dress that set off a tropical figure in the best imaginable manner. Joe didn't spring to his feet; that was slow. All of a sudden, he was on them.

"Hello, Toots, what's cookin'?"

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He looked down at his pad. "Oh, that? Just—practicin'."

"Practicin'? What? A secret code?" Her lips, he noticed, were ripe as cherries. Her teeth like snow.

"Yeah. Sit down, I'll buy ya a snort."

She sat across the table from him,

and gave him a smile that spoke of secret things, of dark nights and full moons, and stars—not on the desert.

"By that," she said, "I suppose you mean something to drink. I will have a glass of wine. Sherry, please, very dry."

"Sure." He raised his hand at a waiter and shouted "Hey, bub! C'mere!"

The waiter took her order and Joe's empty glass and went away while nearby patrons stared with varying degrees of disapproval. Joe had no eye for them, only for this dark vision that sat across the table from him.

"Well, you're quite a surprise," he said. "Only—I'm, uh, kinda busy tonight. Got a little business with a man."

She smiled charmingly. "You have asked me to have a drink."

"Yeah, I know. I kinda got carried away. Maybe we better go some place else for it."

"And your business?"

"Well, I guess that'll have to wait for awhile. How about up to my room?"

The waiter came with their drinks. She toyed with her glass for a moment, raised it to her lips and let her eyes smile across it at him.

"You mean," she asked, "room three-fifty-nine?"

Joe stiffened.

"Who are you?" he asked harshly.

Her smile was still as soft as the night breeze. She sipped her wine again before replying, then fumbled in her purse and drew out a sheet of

paper.

"Dear Villancos——"

"You're E. Villancos?" Joe breathed.

"Elena," she said. "I am so glad to have you here, Senor Padway. Your fame has spread among those of us who wish death to the weak, who work only that the strong shall live."

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle," Joe said.

"Oh, I do not think so, Senor."

"So you're the Villancos that wrote George—me a letter. In that case, just call me George, Elena."

"Gladly, George. I think you are—how do you Norteamericanos say—cayute."

"Cute, you mean."

"Si, cayute. Salud!" She raised her glass.

He clinked his against it. "Say, boy! I'm really hittin' the ball. How about that drink?"

"In three-fifty-nine?"

Her voice held promise, and more. Joe Palmer began to feel that deep stirring of excitement which has no locatable origin, but which drives men forever to beautiful women.

"Yeah," he said breathlessly.

She finished her wine. "Very well, we can talk business there as well as here. Shall we go?"

"Yeah." This was a whisper. "Only leave us stop to get a bottle of something. Talkin' dries my throat."

She smiled again. "As you say, my friend, leave us stop."

In his room, as he poured his wine, Joe thought of dames he'd known in

Brooklyn. Heavy-legged heifers, mostly, and eager beavers to bring you a drink or a light. Not like Elena. As she sat there on the couch, she looked slim and dark and cool, and all the things a guy thought of while making love to the Brooklyn cows.

This was it. All this and fifty G's, too. He grinned as he waited—imagine, Joe Palmer—on her.

"Your wine, madam!" He made what he thought was a seductive bow.

There was no doubting that her slow smile and the nod of her head was seductive. Joe's blood throbbed in his temples.

"Gracias," she murmured.

"What's that mean, Princess?"

Joe sat down beside her and let his thigh rest against hers. She didn't draw away.

"It means thank you, Senor."

"George, baby. Or maybe Georgie. Some dames has called me that. Kind of baby talk, you know!"

"Georgie." She considered. "Yes, I think I like Georgie."

Joe put an arm around her shoulders. "You know, babe, you talk my lingo almost as good as I do."

"That," she said, "is a very high compliment, indeed. But don't you think we should get down to business?"

"Aw, let it go, Princess. With me, you're a business all your own."

"Oh, Georgie," she sighed.

As he started to kiss her, she slipped out of his grasp, and was suddenly out of reach on the other end of the couch. She looked at him with grave eyes.

"I will not say that I find your advances displeasing, Georgie. But I am here on a mission. I must report to my people. There is the matter of the bridge——"

"Oh, yeah. That."

Visions of fifty thousand dollars swam into Joe's mind. He hitched himself along the couch until his thigh was against hers again. He put his arm around her shoulders once more. "Honey, what's fifty grand when I got you?"

She pulled herself away again and got, necessarily, to her feet. "Georgie," she said sadly, "I must say what I have said before. You are not displeasing. But I must conclude my business—first."

"Then you mean after that——"

"After that," she said, and it was a promise.

Joe heaved a sigh. "Okay, Princess. So leave us get down to business."

She changed. At one instant she was the siren of all ages. The next, she became the hard business woman.

"Next Wednesday," she said, "the President will be on a train which will cross the Arroyo Grande Bridge. The time will be two-fifty-three o'clock in the afternoon. That is the assignment."

Joe snapped his fingers. "A cinch."

"Then," she continued, "we shall move in on the capital, and all other important cities. We will time our attacks. This is clear?"

"We-ell," Joe demurred. "All except the dough."

"Ah, dough?"

"Mazuma, geetus, money."

"Oh," she said, and liberated a musical laugh, "that. How much, Senor?"

"In American dough?"

She let one corner of her mouth slide upward.

"In American dough."

"Fifty grand."

"And that, Senor, is——"

"Fifty thousand dollars, babe."

She drew her fine brows together. "That is more than we had in mind——"

"But think what I'm goin' through. Think of the risks."

"That is true," she said. "You are running great risks, Senor—Georgie. And so for this you should have the reward. It really matters little what amount we pay, we shall get it back when we are in control of the government. The peasants shall pay it."

"That's exactly what I keep tellin' ya, Princess," Joe said. He moved close to her again. "Say, you know why I call you Princess? Because you're like one, see? Ain't nobody'd look better in a crown. Baby, it's me for you. I dunno what happened, but all of a sudden, click! And that was it."

She smiled up at him. That long slow smile that set Joe's pulse to hammering. "Oh, Georgie," she sighed.

She let him kiss her briefly. She drew away when he let the weight of his body be added to the act of kissing.

"Fifty——" she said, panting, "fifty thousand, in United Estados money?"

"Right, Princess."

"Then you will give me a note, Georgie, that you have talked with me and we have reached a—how do you say—an agreement."

"Sure, Babe. Wait'll I find some paper. This joint oughta have some somewhere."

Joe rummaged in the writing desk, found a sheet of stationery, and with his special pen wrote:

"I have talked with E. Villancos and we have made a deal which is okay by me.

George Padway"

He gave her the note. She read it, lifted her dark eyes and turned on that slow, exciting smile. "Then I shall be back here at eight o'clock with the—what did you call?—the geetus."

"And then we'll have fun?" Joe asked.

"And then, Senor," she said, smiling promises, and went away.

Joe Palmer set himself down to do a little figuring. Fifty grand would buy him anything he wanted at the moment, especially a way out of this silly country. He thought of the country with contempt. What a bunch of jerks! They send a sweet little innocent gal like Elena up against him, an old-timer, and look what happens to her. She falls, but hard.

Joe Palmer grinned to himself.

He poured another glass of wine, and sat down. How was it she did it? She sipped, a sparrow swallow at a time. He took a few drops.

Say, that was a way to drink, all

right. It kind of warmed you, a little at a time. Funny, he'd never thought of it like this.

There was the time, when he was younger, when he drank everything down at one gulp, gin, whiskey, wine, or any of the other concoctions. But not now. Now he wanted to taste it. So he took another sip and thought of Elena. She was going to be his, as soon as she came back. That was the straight stuff.

Fifty grand. That's a lot of dough. You can buy a fur coat for a babe off Seventh Avenue, or you can say, "How'd you like some pearls, cutie? Imitation, but what the hell?"

Still, there was Elena.

Say, there was a babe, no kidding. She had legs, and everything that went with them; and she had other things, too.

She had the look in her eyes that said fairy tales. Those dark things spoke a language it didn't make any difference if you understood it or not. Say, boy! And she was coming back at eight o'clock.

Say, boy!

THEN it was eight o'clock, and a knock at his door. She was there, flanked by two short dark guys. One had a suitcase. Joe's eyes glinted at the guys, but his smile for Elena was high, wide, and expectant.

"Right on time, huh?"

"Yes, Senor," she said. "These are Senor Martinez and Senor Quantero."

"Hi, fellas. Come on in. That's it in the suitcase?"

"That," Elena said softly, "is it."

They came into his room. Elena crossed to stand beside the writing desk, Senors Martinez and Quantero stayed at the door.

"Take a seat," Joe said expansively.

"They will stay where they are," Elena said evenly.

Joe frowned. "Huh? Say, what goes on?"

"You will see, Senor Padway. Open the suitcase." As he hesitated, she snapped it at him like a whip: "Open it!"

Joe looked at her in puzzlement. "What the hell, Princess? You're actin' funny, babe."

He went to the suitcase, snapped the locks, and opened it. He stared open mouthed at the submachine gun that lay there, loaded with a fresh clip. Then one of the men shoved him, hard, and he was reeling across the room. The other man picked up the gun and cradled it in one elbow. The muzzle was aimed carelessly at Joe's midriff.

Joe pushed flared hands at the gun. "Now, wait!" His voice slipped up the register to a near-soprano. "I dunno what makes, but honest, fellas, —well, Christ! You can't *do* this!"

"Fascist!" Elena spat at him. Her eyes were blazing, and her soft mouth was twisted in a curve of hate.

"Fascist?" Joe echoed in surprise. "What's that, honey?" This came out as a low-grade squeak.

"Listen to me, Senor Padway," she said evenly. "You may as well know why you are going to die. You have been known to us for a long

time as a Fascist saboteur. My mother was a victim of your devilish explosives when you blew up a bridge outside Madrid in the Spanish war. Senor Quantero and Senor Martinez lost their whole families. When we fled the country we made a pact among ourselves that some day you would die. We lured you here with a lie, and we arranged for that poor Senor Palmer to come along so that the operation might sound more authentic to you. If he had not died in the crash, we should have simply shipped him back to the authorities. It was you we were after. Now you will pay."

"Oh, no!" Joe cried. "You got me wrong, babe. I'm not Padway. I'm Joe Palmer. Lissen!" he said with frantic insistence. "Lissen to me!"

His story of the crash and his decision to assume Padway's identity tumbled out in disjointed sentences, and the tone of his voice slipped up and down the scale. He thoughtfully omitted the murder of the possibly dying man, but all the rest was there, even to his terror in the night.

"Fah!" Elena said contemptuously. "Do you deny you wrote this?" She showed him the note he had given her, on hotel stationery.

"No, I wrote it, but——"

"And this?" she snarled, producing the earlier note, also on hotel stationery. "You cannot deny it, murderer! And the same writing is on each."

The muzzle of the submachine gun steadied on Joe's stomach. He pushed out his hands again and cringed

against the far wall.

"You can't do it," he said in a whisper. "Even if I was Padway, I'd be English, and they'll raise hell. You know the English. You can't shoot an Englishman."

Elena's contempt lent her face a furious dark beauty.

"You lie! You are a citizen of Franco Spain! If Senor Franco wishes to avenge your worthless life, he is welcome to try!"

Joe sank to his knees and stretched his hands toward her. His eyes were wide with horror.

"Princess," he babbled, "it's a mistake! I'm Joe Palmer, see? I'm the

guy couldn't pass nothin' but hand-writin' in school. The kids used to say——"

The machine-gun chattered.

Joe Palmer's fountain pen disintegrated, and driven streaks of red, blue and green appeared on his square face. His lips writhed speechlessly under the fantastic make-up and then, as splotches of a darker red than ink appeared on his torn chest, he bent gently at the knees and toppled forward.

"Adios, Senor Padway," commented Elena.

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